

Executive Summary

The Loess Hills of western Iowa are a distinctive topographic region encompassing more than 640,000 acres and extending for nearly 200 miles in a narrow band that parallels the Missouri River valley. Here, exceptionally thick deposits of windblown silt form a region of unique hill forms that have been described as "the best example of loess topography not only in the Central Lowlands, but in the United States" (National Park Service 1985). The striking terrain is an outstanding example of landscapes formed by two fundamental geological processes-- the action of wind and the erosive sculpture of water. The intricately dissected region is characterized by distinctive shapes: narrow corrugated ridges with alternating peaks and saddles; numerous steep side slopes and branching spurs, often featuring natural benches known as "catsteps"; and precipitous bluffs, some with sheer, nearly vertical faces rising from the adjoining Missouri River floodplain. The geologic significance of the Loess Hills has been recognized for well over a hundred years, and the biological significance for nearly as long. The area's rich archeological and historical resources, combined with the extensive prairie ecosystems, contribute to the landform region's exceptional value.

In 1999, Congress directed the National Park Service to conduct a special resource study to evaluate the Loess Hills of Iowa for possible designation as a unit of the National Park System. The study includes a natural and cultural resources overview that describes the study area, and evaluates the national significance of the Loess Hills as well as the suitability and feasibility of including this entire landform region as a unit of the National Park System. In accordance with this legislative direction, the National Park Service has provided management recommendations for the long-term preservation of the Loess Hills of western Iowa in this study document.

The National Park Service recognizes that there is a strong desire by many people and organizations to preserve the scenic and natural values of the area. Already, a number of promising efforts to protect and interpret the Loess Hills have been initiated by state, local, and private entities. These entities include seven local County Conservation Boards, Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development, Loess Hills Alliance, Western Iowa Tourism Region, Western Hills Area Education Agency, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Loess Hills National Scenic Byway Council, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Loess Hills Preservation Society, and The Nature Conservancy. Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and the Natural Resource Conservation Service serve as federal partners in several efforts currently underway to study and protect the Loess Hills.

Based on the application of National Park Service criteria, the National Park Service concludes that the Loess Hills landform region contains resources of national significance. It also finds that the Loess Hills would be a suitable addition to the National Park System.

However, the ownership pattern, size, multiple jurisdictions, threats, and lack of comprehensive planning make designation as a unit of the National Park Service not feasible. Five management frameworks for the long-term preservation of the Loess Hills are identified and evaluated in this special resource study. One management concept provides for the continuation of local management at the city and/or county level (no change), while another calls for a more holistic approach to managing the region through the formation of a Joint Powers Board. The Joint Powers Board could be composed of representatives from each county containing a portion of the landform region. Neither of these concepts includes federal designation. The other two alternatives include National Park Service involvement by designating either portions of, or the entire region as a National Reserve, an affiliated area of the National Park Service. Each management option considers land protection programs already available in the Loess Hills, comments received from landowners and citizens living within the study area, as well as comments from the general public. Together, these four alternatives, while having various degrees of federal, state and local involvement, remain sensitive to private landowner concerns and complement existing conservation efforts of state, local, and private entities.

In evaluating the management alternatives, the National Park Service recognized the value of having strong, locally based support and commitment to preserving the Loess Hills landform region. The National Park Service also recognized that the agency could provide support to local efforts to protect the significant resources of the Loess Hills and could help ensure that these resources are preserved for generations to come.

The recommended management strategy for the Loess Hills landform region is a blend of the four management alternatives previously discussed. This combination relies upon local planning efforts and the voluntary formation of a Joint Powers Board. Upon completion of a Comprehensive Plan that meets National Park Service criteria, the Loess Hills of western Iowa, or selected segments of the Loess Hills, could be designated as a National Reserve by request of the Joint Powers Board and the Governor of Iowa. This strategy provides for an initiative that originates at the local level and allows for state and federal assistance. This recommendation recognizes the national significance of the Loess Hills, encourages and enables local units of government to develop measures to protect the resources of the Loess Hills. The recommendation also provides for federal participation in the preservation of the Loess Hills at a level of involvement supported by local units of government and citizens of the region.

Additionally, the study team recommends the following studies:

- An evaluation of the *Glenwood Archeological Locality* and the *Jones Creek Watershed* properties for possible National Historic Landmark designation.
- An evaluation of any or all of the 12 Special Landscape Areas identified by this study (Appendix D) for National Natural Landmark designation.
- An ethnographic resources study to include a cultural affiliation component and a cultural properties survey that identifies places in the Loess Hills that are important to the cultural traditions and beliefs of native peoples who have an historical association with the Loess Hills.